

## Pessimist spelling alphabets

Tristan Miller

Darmstadt, Germany

<http://www.nothingisreal.com/>

A spelling alphabet (also known as a phonetic alphabet or a telephone alphabet) is a set of words which are used to stand for letters of the alphabet; they're typically used when spelling out words over the telephone or in other noisy or low-bandwidth environments. The most widely used spelling alphabet in English is the NATO phonetic alphabet, which starts, "Alfa, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo...".

In a typical spelling alphabet, each word starts with the letter it is meant to represent (e.g., "D as in delta"), and the words are selected such that they are unlikely to be confused with similar-sounding words (and especially other words in the spelling alphabet). Things get pretty interesting when you bend or break these rules. For example, below is a spelling alphabet where each word begins with the letter it represents, but none of the letters have their usual phonetic values. (The third column gives the pronunciation using the International Phonetic Alphabet.)

letter	word	IPA pronunciation
A	aye	/aɪ/
B	bdellium	/'dɛli,ʌm/
C	cnidarian	/nɪ'dɛriən/
D	djinn	/dʒɪn/
E	eau	/o/
F	Floyd	/fɔɪd/
G	gnome	/noʊm/
H	honest	/'anɛst/
I	Iyar	/'ijɑɪr/

J	Jung	/juŋ/
K	knight	/naɪt/
L	LXVI	/sɪksti'sɪksθ/
M	mnemonic	/nə'maɪnɪk/
N	ngultrum	/'ŋultrəm/
O	oecology	/i'kalədʒi/
P	psalm	/səm/
Q	qi	/tʃi:/
R	Rx	/prə'skrɪpʃən/
S	Sn	/tɪn/
T	tchotchke	/'tʃɒtʃkə/
U	Uyghur	/'wɪgə/
V	VIII	/eɪtθ/
W	wrap	/ræp/
X	XVII	/seɪvən'tɪnθ/
Y	Yves	/i:v/
Z	Zhivago	/ʒɪ'vago/

Admittedly, I had to cheat somewhat by using some abbreviations (Rx = prescription), Roman numerals (VIII = eighth), and the authentic Welsh pronunciation of Floyd. Just imagine if this spelling alphabet were standard and someone named Mr. Grysbol had to spell his name over the telephone: “Yes, operator, my name is Augustus Grysbol. That's G for gnome, R for prescription, Y for Yves, S for tin, B for bdellium, O for oecology, and L for sixty-sixth.”

We can construct an even more confusing spelling alphabet by dispensing with the requirement of starting each word with the letter it represents (though the word must still contain the letter), and by choosing words which sound just like other letters, or (rather uselessly) like themselves. We might then end up with something like the following:

letter	word	sounds like
A	aye	I
B	double-u	W
C	cue	Q
D	zed	Z
E	ewe	U
F	eff	F
G	gee	G
H	why	Y
I	aitch	H
J	jay	J
K	Eck's	X
L	double-u	W
M	em	M
N	en	N
O	double-u	W
P	pea	P
Q	quay	K
R	are	R
S	sea	C
T	aitch	H
U	eau	O
V	vee	V
W	owe	O
X	ex	X
Y	ay	A
Z	zed	Z

To get an idea of how ridiculously prone to fault this system is, consider the case of a Mr. Paddy West spelling his name over the telephone: “P as in pea, A as in aye, double D as in zed, Y as in ay, then W as in owe, E as in ewe, S as in sea, and T as in aitch.” The person on the other end may well end up writing poor Mr. West's name as “Pizza Ouch”.